Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

Saskatchewan

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Log Number: 06-44-201
Week of October 30, 2006

PRODUCER HAS GOOD EXPERIENCE WITH HEMP

John Ackland heard all the jokes when he decided to try his hand at growing hemp on his farmland.

"The first time I grew it around here, I had lots of guys coming into the shop and laughing, 'So, you're growing marijuana, are you?'" he chuckled.

"Now it's becoming a more common crop around here, and the jokes are long gone," he said. "People are starting to understand that it's actually a cash crop. Now, my phone bounces off the wall with people asking how they go about getting contracts to grow hemp. So they realize there is potential out there."

Commercial hemp production became legal in Canada in 1998, although growers must still be licensed by Health Canada. In 2005, roughly 24,000 acres were seeded to the crop across the country – over one-third of it in Saskatchewan, equally split between conventional and organic production.

The seed from the hemp plant contains an edible oil used for cosmetics and cooking, which has many positive health benefits. It is low in saturated fats, and contains a mixture of omega-6 and omega-3 fatty acids, as well as gamma linolenic acid, a nutraceutical compound.

The fibre from the hemp plant is also very durable, and can be used for making clothing, paper and building materials, although this market is not well-developed in North America.

Ackland says there are a lot of things farmers should learn about producing hemp before they decide to get into it. "You definitely do not grow hemp without a contract to sell it with a company," he noted. "You can get hung out to dry on it. You can end up with that product for years until there's a shortage in the industry and they put out an advertised call for it."

Ackland stated that the buyers from the processing companies also serve as excellent sources of advice for hemp growers. "They just don't turn you loose without any support. They continue to provide you with support along the way, because it is a different crop. It's not like you're growing a different variety of wheat. It's a lot different than that," he said.

Ackland says there are plenty of surprises and learning experiences for first-time hemp growers. The height of the plant is something that will astonish most producers. "It grows tremendously fast. It will grow a foot a week. I have plants out there that are six or seven feet tall," he noted.

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Patience is also an important virtue for hemp growers. "The window of opportunity for seeding it is between May 15 and June 15, and it is much wiser to seed the crop well into June," Ackland stated. "Even though it is listed in terms of days to maturity, that isn't how it matures. It's a photosensitive plant, so if you seed it too early, you just end up with an awfully tall plant."

There are no insecticides, herbicides or fungicides approved for use on the crop. "In the spring of the year, you could do a burn-off with Roundup before you seed it, but once you seed it, you're done," said Ackland.

"Hemp is a very high nitrogen user, however, and unless you're going organic, you have to put a lot of nitrogen and phosphorous in the ground. Otherwise, you end up with a disaster of a crop."

Ackland pointed out that hemp can be very temperamental to harvest, requiring some specialized equipment or modifications to standard implements. "The plant tends to wrap around the shafts of a combine, and it's a very tough fibre. Every time you stop to dump a hopper, you get in the habit of jumping off and cutting hemp off the external shafts of the combine," he noted.

"When you take it off, you have to take it off tough. It's not a crop you can go out and combine 150 acres a day, because you couldn't handle the seed coming off. You have to air it down, you have to dry it."

Despite these challenges, Ackland says his foray into hemp has been well worth the effort, and he will definitely be continuing. Although it's a fairly new industry with some growing pains, Ackland says the hemp market is expanding, attracting greater interest from farmers.

At current prices, Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food projects that break-even yields for conventional and organic hemp production are 10 and five bushels per acre, respectively. Ackland estimates his crop yielded 20 bushels an acre this year. "It's the only crop I know of that has a decent profit margin," he said.

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NEW BRAND FOR SASKATCHEWAN-GROWN TOMATOES

The Saskatchewan Greenhouse Growers Association (SGGA) has created a new brand to give consumers a better chance to "buy local."

The association is now rolling out that brand in the form of tomato boxes bearing a logo and the phrase "Saskatchewan's Own Greenhouse Tomatoes" in bright green printing. The boxes will be sold to SGGA members and other growers, who will use them when marketing their greenhouse tomatoes.

SGGA President Rick Van Duyvendyk says the branded tomato boxes make it easier to identify product grown right here in the province.

"The brand, *Saskatchewan's Own Greenhouse Tomatoes*, is something that will show the consumer that the product is grown right here in the province and that the growers are proud to be growing here," said Van Duyvendyk. "It will give the consumer the option to choose to buy something grown in Saskatchewan."

At this point, the size of the boxes is more suited for wholesale and retail display than individual purchase, but Van Duyvendyk says getting retailers to recognize the brand is a good start.

"It helps to grow the market. We grow a good product here, so when a produce manager or retailer sees it in a branded box, then they know to go after that product again because that's what customers like. That's what they have to keep putting back on the shelf," he noted.

Van Duyvendyk says there is a further opportunity to expand the branded boxes to include other Saskatchewan greenhouse-grown products like cucumbers, peppers and lettuce, as well as to create smaller, consumer-sized boxes.

"Branding is huge, and it is the way you can make yourself stick out from the rest of the crowd," explained Van Duyvendyk.

The cost of printing and the large size of the print run required have prevented growers from creating a branded box of their own in the past. However, Van Duyvendyk says that is one of the benefits of being a part of an association like the SGGA.

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"When we come together, we can do things that we couldn't do on our own because of the cost of the set up. Now you are making a large quantity, so you can afford to make a larger run because you can split the cost among a number of growers," he said.

The greenhouse industry has no shortage of room for growth in Saskatchewan. Right now, less than one per cent of the tomatoes consumed in the province are grown here. Most are imported from Alberta, B.C. and Ontario.

Van Duyvendyk says greenhouses are an opportunity for producers to diversify into a high-value, low-acreage crop.

"For rural Saskatchewan, the bottom line is it's a way to fuel the farm gate. A lot of these greenhouses are not in the city, they are out in the countryside. Wherever we can create more jobs and create more traffic at the farm gate, it's a bonus for the province," said Van Duyvendyk.

The tomato boxes, which hold 25 pounds of tomatoes, are 22 inches long by 18 inches wide and are available on a first-come, first-served basis to growers.

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SOIL NUTRIENT RESEARCHER AT HOME IN THE LAB AND THE FIELD

It's been said that those who can't do, teach, but Dr. Jeff Schoenau defies conventional wisdom.

Born and raised in Saskatchewan, he earned his undergraduate degree and Ph.D. in soil fertility at the University of Saskatchewan's College of Agriculture, but the classroom, the laboratory and the library never took him very far away from the land.

Today, Dr. Schoenau is the Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF) Strategic Research Chair in Soil Nutrient Management, as well as a working farmer.

"The practical, hands-on experience helps me a lot in my research," says Dr. Schoenau. Between research and teaching at the University of Saskatchewan, he also manages to farm about 1,600 acres near Central Butte. His production includes wheat, canola, barley and pulse crops. "I have a number of research trials right out there," Schoenau said.

Dr. Schoenau's research is part of the $16.5 million Strategic Research Program, funded by SAF to engage leading scholars in agricultural research and development specific to Saskatchewan producers' needs. He leads research projects aimed at providing innovative solutions to soil nutrient problems, with the objectives of improving crop profitability and maintaining soil quality.

"Really, it's looking at ways to maximize nutrient recovery and minimize losses to maintain and improve the quality of the soil resource. Nutrients cost dollars, and become a potential issue in the environment when they escape," says Schoenau.

Dr. Schoenau's research team includes a full-time assistant, plus contributions from numerous graduate students at the University of Saskatchewan. They are currently working on subjects as varied as fertilizer distribution rate and placement, the use of organics such as alfalfa pellets for soil nutrition, liquid and solid manure qualities and the rejuvenation of forage stands with fertilizer.

The results of the projects are presented to various scientific journals, but more importantly to Dr. Schoenau, he is able to share the new ideas at producer and industry conventions.

He attends numerous such forums, including soil and crop workshops, direct-seeding meetings and Agriculture Canada field days. "I consider that a very important part of what I do. I do a lot of outreach activities," says Schoenau.

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Dr. Schoenau sees producers improving soil nutrient management more and more each year with techniques such as zero-till and crop rotation. "We have, over the past 15 years, done a great job of improving the quality of our soil," he says.

It gives him great optimism to be teaching the new practices to the students who will go on to become leaders in agriculture and government.

Meanwhile, back on the farm, Jeff Schoenau translates academic research into action. "When someone asks me a question about some practice or process I have been looking at, I guess I can always answer with what I would do on my own farm."

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IMPORTANT TIPS FOR PROPER PULSE CROP STORAGE

Pulse crops are growing in popularity among Saskatchewan producers. That paid off in spades this year, with some very high-quality crops. Processors report that over 90 per cent of lentils, peas and chickpeas in the province should be in the top two grades.

However, according to Ray McVicar, Provincial Special Crops Specialist with Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF), farmers need to follow proper storage techniques now that their pulse crops are in the bin, or they could be in for some unpleasant surprises.

"Pulse crops advanced rapidly throughout most of the Prairies in 2006," McVicar noted. Because pulses (other than beans and soybeans) are often planted first, this year's early spring conditions in areas other than north-eastern Saskatchewan saw early-seeded crops take advantage of warm soils and good rainfall in June.

Many pea and lentil crops matured quickly in the heat of July, and some were ready to be harvested in early August. In fact, drought conditions in south-western Saskatchewan resulted in a very early harvest in that region. According to McVicar, a lot of pulse crops were put into storage at high temperature, which makes them more prone to bleaching and oxidization.

"Monitoring stored grain during and after harvest is an important part of a grower's day-to-day activities," McVicar said. "The safe storage of pulse crops is important every year, and the key to avoiding mould and other storage problems is the use of aeration to cool and dry the seed."

McVicar stated that testing with a moisture meter is something that farmers should carry out several times after the crop is binned. "Now that we've had some wet weather, producers should monitor their stored crops immediately to prevent any losses due to spoilage," he said. "The risk of spoilage becomes greater if the crop was harvested following the wet weather. This risk is greatly reduced if foreign material is removed."

Because of their large size, stored chickpeas and peas need time for the moisture to equalize throughout the seed. Chickpeas harvested at high temperatures will most likely sweat in the bin. This occurs as the moisture migrates within the bin.

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For prolonged safe storage, pulse crops should be cooled to less than 15 degrees Celsius and dried to less than 14 per cent moisture. Seed that is cooled to 10 degrees Celsius will store well for long periods.

The Saskatchewan Pulse Growers Pulse Production Manual, found online at http://www.saskpulse.com/media/pdfs/ppm-field-pea.pdf, contains a table outlining the number of weeks for safe storage of peas at specified moisture content and temperature. For example, peas stored at 14 per cent moisture and 10 degrees Celsius can be safely stored for about 95 weeks. Peas stored at 18 per cent moisture and 20 degrees Celsius have a safe storage limit of only seven weeks. Other pulse crops will be similar.

Different moisture content levels must be taken into consideration for red lentils. Red lentils are considered to be dry at 13 per cent moisture content. Red lentil buyers around the world prefer the crop to be at 13 per cent moisture content or lower, and growers should work to achieve that level. This year's hot, dry summer allowed most lentils to be harvested dry.

Pulse crops at 12 per cent moisture or lower are more prone to chipping and peeling during handling, especially when the temperature has dropped below minus 20 degrees Celsius.

McVicar noted that a bin equipped with an aeration fan can provide both cooling and drying. But while cooling may be completed in one day, drying can take three to four weeks. To dry the crop, the aeration fan must have adequate power to provide air flow through the grain. "The recommended requirement for aeration drying of a pulse crop is about one to two cubic feet of air per minute per bushel, or about 2,000 to 4,000 cubic feet per minute for a 2,000-bushel bin," said McVicar.

He added that crops that weren't taken off before the rains may require supplemental heat-drying. "With pulses, air temperatures should not exceed 45 degrees Celsius to preserve germination, and the sample should not be dried more than four to five percentage points per pass through the drier," McVicar stated. "The product should be allowed to temper in an aeration bin between passes."

However, McVicar reminds producers that the augers within a grain dryer can increase seed coat peeling and cracking. He suggested that growers who use long-term storage to help their pulse marketing plan can also make good use of a belt conveyor. "Pulse crops often need to be given a rotation in the bin to prevent spoilage, and a conveyor can accomplish this with very little seed damage," he pointed out. "Growers in the need of a new auger might want to investigate moving to a belt system."

For more information on storing pulses, contact the Agriculture Knowledge Centre at 1-866-457-2377.

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NEW FORMAT FOR PORK SYMPOSIUM PROMISES TO DELIVER

The twenty-ninth annual Saskatchewan Pork Industry Symposium is "Celebrating a World of Information" on November 14-15 in Saskatoon. This year's theme is "Through the Crossroads of Competition," and symposium co-ordinator Patty Martin says she wants attendees to know a brand new format has been introduced.

"We're holding it over two days, but we've put in more information," said Martin. "The first day, which was traditionally aimed at stock people, will still speak to them, but it also has some broader information for everyone."

Featured speakers include the Honourable Mark Wartman, Minister of Agriculture and Food, and Michael H. McCain, President and CEO of Maple Leaf Foods. Martin says the symposium office has been taking a lot of calls about McCain's appearance.

"He's probably going to be the most popular speaker this year," said Martin. "I know a lot of people will want to come and hear him, and he intends on being here."

Other sessions include speakers addressing jobs in the pork industry, and the morning of day one is divided into several break-out sessions on topics such as breeding, farrowing or growing and finishing.

The afternoon of day one also features a "hot topics" panel discussion, moderated by Kevin Hursh of Hursh Consulting and Communications. Panel guests include Florian Possberg of Big Sky Farms, Ray Price with Sunterra Group, and Shannon Meyers of Fast Genetics. Day two features a bigger picture look at the state of the industry, with topics such as foreign trade and production costs.

Because of the switch to a two-day symposium, the banquet now happens on the evening of the first day, Tuesday, November 14. Minister Wartman is the keynote speaker for this year's banquet.

Martin says that a wide variety of people who deal with the pork industry in some way can benefit from attending the symposium.

"Producers, hog barn owners and managers, industry suppliers, government representatives – all are more than welcome, and they will all get something from the science and new research that's being presented," Martin noted.

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The registration deadline for the symposium is November 6. Registration forms can be downloaded from the event listing at www.saskpork.com. Early registration and booking of accommodations is encouraged.

The cost to register for the full two-day conference is $135 per person. One-day registration is also available for $70 per person, and those attending on the first day receive a banquet ticket along with their registration.

The symposium is a joint presentation of the Saskatchewan Pork Development Board and the Livestock Development Branch of Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food.

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